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ED278602

TEACHING ABOUT AFRICA

ERIC Digest No. 36

by Merry M. Merryfield

November 1986

SO 017 888

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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 602 SO 017 888

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TITLE Teaching about Africa. ERIC Digest No. 36.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Nov 86
CONTRACT 400-86-0020
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Smith Research Center, Suite 120, 2805 East Tenth Street, Bloomington, IN 47405.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *African Culture; Concept Teaching; Course Content; Educational Resources; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Geography; *Global Approach; History; Instructional Materials; Learning Activities; *Social Studies; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Africa; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Recognizing the need to strengthen education about Africa in United States schools and to enable teachers to present complex issues about apartheid, political stability, and cultural conflict, this digest addresses the issue of how teachers can improve their teaching about Africa. The article poses 3 questions: (1) Why is it important to teach about Africa? (2) Where does Africa belong in the curriculum? and (3) What strategies can be used to teach about Africa? Included is a bibliography of resources. (KWL)

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Teaching About Africa

by Merry M. Merryfield

There is growing recognition of the need to strengthen education about Africa in American schools. Although teachers and textbooks have improved their treatments of African topics over the last twenty years, serious biases and omissions remain (Beyer 1968; Crofts 1986). Most classroom teachers today have had little or no formal education on Africa. Yet they are asked to teach complex issues about apartheid, political stability, and cultural conflict. The old myths of the so-called "Dark Continent" are often replaced with new media stereotypes that focus on hunger, poverty, disease, and violence.

How can educators improve their teaching about Africa? This ERIC Digest examines (1) the importance of teaching about Africa, (2) the place of Africa in the curriculum, and (3) strategies for teaching about Africa.

Why Is It Important To Teach About Africa?

- *Africa's size in land and population makes it a significant area of the world.* This second largest continent has over three times the land area of the United States. One of every three countries in the United Nations is African. One of every ten persons in the world today lives in Africa. Africa has the highest population growth of any world region.
- *Africa is a treasure chest of natural resources.* The United States looks to this continent for such strategic metals and minerals as gold, platinum, chromium, titanium, uranium, and petroleum as well as agriculture products such as cocoa, rubber, and vegetable oils. African markets are increasingly important for expanding American exports of agriculture and technology.
- *Africa is the root culture for Black Americans.* Unlike the immigration experiences of other Americans, the slave trade tore Africans from their home countries. Myths and stereotypes continue to deny Black Americans accurate knowledge, pride, and linkages with their ethnic homelands.
- *Although Africa may be of special interest to Black Americans, it is important to all Americans.* There are many Africanisms in American culture. Jazz has its roots in the polyrhythmic music of Africa. Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit are examples of African influence on our literature. A study of African societies provides valuable lessons on governance by consensus, on the primacy of social relationships, respect for elders, and strong family ties. African art, music, and esthetics can enrich American education as they demonstrate the union of man, God, and nature in African thought.

Where Does Africa Belong in the Curriculum?

African content belongs at every level of the social studies curriculum as part of a global perspective in education. Children will develop more interest and appreciation of other cultures if they are exposed to such content from an early age. Even before they can read, young children can enjoy playing African games and singing African songs. Along with their study of American families, communities, and holidays, early elementary pupils can learn about Bocharie's family in Sierra Leone, Ali's community near Mombasa, and Sammani's and Maryama's celebration of Ramadan in Kano, Nigeria.

At the upper elementary and middle school grades, children should learn about several African countries in detail. Global studies courses are well-suited for teaching African issues and concerns. African content is especially appropriate for such social studies themes and concepts as interaction between man and his environment, the role of women, cultural diffusion, and human rights.

In American history courses, it is important to provide African background and viewpoints on the slave trade. The uniqueness of this special "immigrant" group and enduring Africanisms in American culture should be integrated into the study of the colonial period and contemporary America. Africa provides a laboratory for examining the decisions and effects of United States foreign policy. Why do we give foreign aid to countries such as Egypt and Kenya? What have been the results of the policy of "constructive engagement" towards South Africa?

Geography and world history courses are core subjects for African content at the secondary level. Africa should be studied as "the Cradle of Mankind." Ancient Egypt, trans-Saharan trade, and African kingdoms of the last 2000 years demonstrate the sophistication of African societies. African and western perspectives toward the colonial era will contribute to a better understanding of contemporary Africa. Again, Africa should not be taught separately, but woven into the mosaic of world history and geography.

African content is also appropriate for sociology, economics, and current events courses. Zimbabwe can be used as a case study of self-determination and nation-building. Educational materials from South Africa can be used to demonstrate the power of propaganda. Statistics on African imports and exports can clarify the concept of dependency. Students should be encouraged to evaluate current African events through African perspectives and within a global context.

What Strategies Can Be Used To Teach About Africa?

1. Counteract stereotypes about Africa by teaching historical and contemporary realities of both rural and urban life. Instead of using words that elicit Tarzan-like images, speak of ethnic groups (not tribes), homes (not huts), and tropical rain forests (not jungles). The larger, more typical African societies (such as the Hausa, Yobuba, Kikuyu) should receive more attention than the smaller societies (such as the San or Mputi) who often are portrayed wrongly as untouched by the twentieth century.

Merry M. Merryfield has worked in teacher education for the African Studies Program at Indiana University since 1981.

2. *Make valid comparisons.* Do not compare Africa with China and Japan. Africa is a continent with over fifty countries and incredible diversity in culture, geography, political structures, and economies. Choose specific African countries for comparison. Nigeria, as a large and very diverse African nation, would be an appropriate country to compare with China. When comparing across nations, always examine similarities and explain differences. In what ways is urbanization around Nairobi similar to urbanization near your own community? Why do Kenyans prefer larger families than do Americans? Africa can be compared as a continent to Asia or Latin America.

3. *Teach African content through a global perspective by examining universal themes and concepts.* Nigeria could be compared with Sri Lanka and Peru to demonstrate ways countries deal with cultural diversity. The effect of governmental policies on food production can be examined by case studies of Zimbabwe, India, and Tanzania.

4. *Use content on Africa to teach social studies skills.* An examination of colonial documents and letters could be a lesson in detecting bias and unstated assumptions. Case studies of mineworkers in South Africa, cocoa farmers in Ghana, or unemployed secondary school graduates in Lagos could be used to practice decision-making skills in real-life situations.

5. *Teach respect and understanding for Africans.* When teaching about problems, focus on how they evolved. Why does Ethiopia have a refugee problem? What can we learn from that situation to help us understand refugee problems elsewhere? Do not let your study of Africa be overwhelmed by negative aspects. Teach about the success of black-white cooperation in independent Kenya. Students can come to enjoy Africa through its rich contemporary cultures. Lessons on Yoruba hairstyles, Lingala music, and Swahili cuisine can stimulate student interest and appreciation of Africa.

6. *Involve students in seeing and feeling African life.* Current films and other audio-visual materials are essential. Do not use 1960s media to teach about Africa today. Simulations and primary sources (African literature, newspapers, photographs, tapes of speeches) can build empathy and understanding.

7. *Bring African resources in your community into your classroom.* African students at a nearby college, organizations that do business with African nations, or anti-apartheid/human rights groups can be rich sources of information.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a bibliography of resources. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0020. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.